

SASOL Workers Regroup *

On February 1 negotiations reopened with Sasol over the union's demand for re-instatement of sacked workers. In mid-February after some hard bargaining the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) was presented with a final take-it-or-leave-it offer from management. The main points of the offer were:

1. A minimum of 70% of re-applying workers to be employed. This would include at least 16 shopstewards out of 48 originally sacked (6 were still working; and some did not re-apply). Those workers not initially taken back still retain the right to be considered. Early indications are that 75% have already regained their jobs.
2. Previous rights gained by the union are to be continued: access to hostels, access to notice boards, limited office facility in the hostel, meetings with management on a regular and emergency basis, and stop-orders.
3. Additional trade union rights negotiated. The most important item here is the recognition of CWIU shop stewards, who are to receive letters of accreditation signed by the personnel department and initialled by the individual foremen. Recognition involves:
 - a) shop stewards will represent workers in grievance and disciplinary hearings, with time off for this.
 - b) time off for a formal caucus of the shop stewards committee (1 half day per month).
 - c) report back time in working hours.
 - d) 10 days per annum for union training (5 days paid by the company) plus additional unpaid time as agreed.
 - c) access to telephones for union business.

In addition a union negotiating team of 8 (officials and shop stewards) is to be established to negotiate procedures and other matters with Sasol management.

The agreement was signed by the CWIU on March 5. Whilst this undoubtedly involved compromise on the question of numbers, Sasol's original project - to effectively smash the union - was prevented. This represents a considerable achievement

* see SALB 10.3 and 10.4 for background details

given the harsh terrain on which the union fought. A range of rights have been wrested from a powerful parastatal company; these rights provide the union with space in which to reorganise. These gains reflect the unity and organisation of the Sasol workers and the solidarity of other workers (see SALB 10.4). Also an examination of the union's conduct of the campaign, and the processes of worker control which were invoked, indicates widespread debate amongst members and massive rank and file involvement.

Worker control: democracy in action

Up till management's final ultimatum, negotiations were handled by a small team made up of the general secretary, branch secretary, 1-2 local organisers and 1-3 shop stewards (plus legal adviser). Report backs to Sasol workers were held almost weekly during the four month campaign and briefings were sent to groups of sacked workers in the homelands, as far as possible. CWIU branches, FOSATU regions and all the unity unions were given regular reports. CWIU called for debate in all its factories since, clearly, the Sasol struggle was bound up with the future course of the entire union. Shop stewards from the factories were to carry the decisions of workers to the Branch Executive Committees. From the BECs reps reported, under mandate, to the NEC.

The NEC of February 2 decided to refer the matter to the branches. It was already clear that Sasol would take a hard-line against 100% reinstatement, so BECs were asked for guidance on what final settlement would be acceptable. The NEC met again in mid-February after the final offer was made. Branches had already held their meetings, but the NEC decided that more time was required to ensure that every factory discussed the issue, so that the final decision would be truly representative of the entire union. Towards this end the NEC called the union's first National Shop Stewards Congress, in effect delegating its powers to the rank and file activists, to ensure maximum involvement and legitimacy.

On March 2, 200 shop stewards (over 50% of all CWIU shop stewards) came together to debate the Sasol question. At the end of the day the Congress decided unanimously to adopt the agreement. Arguments put forward by the workers included:

- * This was an exceptional situation. The union was confront-

ing a powerful and strategic state industry.

- * At the time of the sackings the union was left with nothing. Pressure had forced the company to negotiate and produced concessions, but that was as far as Sasol was likely to go. It was necessary for the union to recognise its limitations, given the power of the company.
- * To opt for all-out war at this stage would involve a massive commitment of resources which would reduce the union's work on other fronts. There was also the possibility that the union might be excluded from Sasol altogether, for the immediate future.
- * Workers were in no doubt that the other unity unions would back them in a national demonstration strike on the issue. However, the feeling was that they should not endanger other jobs, especially in a recession, and especially when they were not convinced that this action would focus pressure sufficiently against Sasol.

The Congress concluded that CWIU should accept Sasol's offer so as to retain a strong presence within the company and to gain space to regroup; above all to look to the future.

These arguments were accepted by Sasol workers themselves at a report-back general meeting held on March 5. The 900-strong meeting included some sacked workers and a majority of working members (some of them new members). This number was a normal turnout (due to shift-working and the fact that security guard members live 12 km from the main hostels), and represents a current membership of approximately 3,000 (50% of the plant) - a considerable achievement in the face of mass sackings. Also, since November, the union has signed up, and secured stop orders for, over 50% of the 9000 coal miners in the Sasol complex. This was achieved despite problems of stabilising membership amongst a workforce with high turnover, and in the face of management harassment. It remains to explain why it was that the mighty Sasol was forced to compromise with CWIU.

Why did Sasol compromise?

A number of points can be made:

- * FOSATU was able to mobilise its international connections very quickly to unleash a massive worldwide trade union response, which coincided with the upsurge of anti-

- Sasol -

apartheid pressure in the USA. This threatens Sasol with a long-term overseas "image" problem. Questions have also been raised about companies that supply Sasol with expertise, particularly Fluor.

- * Within South Africa the tremendous response from the unity unions and the threat of national strike action sounded alarm bells. In addition these unions were beginning to pressurise their members' pension funds to withdraw investment from Sasol.
- * Within the Sasol complex management was faced with a magnificent show of solidarity and courage from miners as they signed up for CWIU in their thousands.
- * In the Secunda area the union maintained a constant presence as a core of sacked activists, shop stewards and organisers simply refused to go away, sending out a clear message to Sasol: "If you want the workers you have to settle with the union".
- * It became clear very soon that despite Sasol's contempt for its "migrant workers" they relied on those workers to maintain production. Given the sophisticated and continuous nature of production, the disruptive effects of sacking the majority of the workforce must have been costly. Further costs included transport, re-engagement and training costs.
- * The dispute undoubtedly dented Sasol's image as South Africa's modern prestige project.
- * Sasol was also isolated from other sections of capital. Amongst business commentators it was widely held that Sasol had gone over the top. Also, FOSATU factories were pressing their managements to protest to Sasol.

Future priorities for CWIU

The union is faced with a number of immediate tasks:

- * to maintain contact with sacked workers, and represent them to Sasol management. Workers see this as a necessary obligation.
- * additional resources have been allocated to the local office.
- * shop stewards (many of them newly elected) will have to be trained to meet the new situation. The shop stewards committee has to be re-established as soon as possible.
- * the recruitment drive has to continue within the Sasol plant and on the mines. On the mines, the CWIU has yet to

formalise shop steward rights and other facilities.

The experience of the Sasol struggle bears directly on the whole question of organising in the state sector. It is for the union itself to analyse the lessons of the strike and the reinstatement campaign. In the meantime we can assert that Sasol has been forced to accept the union (and by implication the politics of the stay-away). Moreover the stay-away, and the campaign that followed, has dealt a deathblow to the paternalist style which characterised every level of Sasol management. Sasol's new and more "enlightened" approach - particularly over shop steward recognition - suggests a possible restructuring of its personnel function. This is itself a direct result of worker organisation and unity. The space that this agreement gives allows the Sasol workers to regroup and begin again to push back the frontiers of dictatorial managerial control.

(SALB Correspondent, March 1985)